

6-1977

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Recommended Citation

(1977) "Forrest's Johnsonville Raid," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol5/iss1/4>

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FORREST'S JOHNSONVILLE RAID

Scott Conder

Between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. on November 4, 1864, the artillery under the command of Confederate Major-General Nathan Bedford Forrest began its assault on the Federal railroad terminal of Johnsonville, Tennessee. Johnsonville, named after Andrew Johnson, the Federal military governor of Tennessee during the Civil War, was a vital link in the Union supply lines to General W. T. Sherman in Georgia. Few people realize the purpose of, or appreciate the brilliant execution of the Confederate offensive on Johnsonville in late 1864.

At the time the Johnsonville raid took place, both Nashville and Memphis were occupied by Union forces. General Grant, with over 100,000 Federal troops, was attempting to take Petersburg, Virginia, from General Lee. Confederate General John B. Hood had defended Atlanta with heavy losses on July 20th and 22nd and finally lost control to Sherman's 82,000 men. Hood continued to harass Sherman, but was unable to take Atlanta again.¹

General Sherman was at the end of a 435 mile long supply line which was routed from the north through Nashville. The three possible lines to Nashville from Kentucky were the Louisville and Nashville railroad, the Cumberland River, and the Nashville and Northwestern railroad line which ran from Johnsonville to Nashville. The Louisville and Nashville line was subject to guerilla raids in Kentucky, and the Cumberland was not always navigable. This left the Nashville and Northwestern rail, supplied by Tennessee River steamboats, as the only reliable line of supplies for Sherman.² With this in mind, General Dick Taylor sent Forrest to terminate the flow of supplies. Forrest indicated that he was aware of his purpose when he wrote to General Taylor, "The great, predominating, absorbing desire is to cut Sherman's line of communication."³

On October 26, Brigadier General Abraham Buford was ordered to the area around the mouth of the Big Sandy river for the purpose of blockading the Tennessee river. He chose the old Confederate Fort Heiman and Paris Landing, located on the west bank of the river about forty miles north of Johnsonville, as the sites he would use. Bell's Brigade, with a section of Morton's battery of artillery, was then stationed at Paris Landing. Lyon's Brigade, with Brown's artillery, took position at Fort Heiman, about five miles north of Paris Landing, just north of the Kentucky border. They had two twenty pound Parrott guns that had been sent from Mobile, Alabama.⁴ General Chalmers was sent to Paris, Tennessee in order to support Buford.

A man known as "Old Man Jack Hinson," whose two sons had been executed at Fort Heiman for bushwhacking Federal troops, aided Lyon's men in choosing their location for the Parrott guns. Out of revenge he had shot several officers at Fort Heiman while it was in Federal hands, and continued to shoot at officers on the decks of passing gunboats and transports. Hinson, therefore, knew the area very well, and suggested the most advantageous positions for Lyon's guns.⁵

On October 29, the Federal steamer Mazeppa passed the lower section of Morton's battery at Fort Heiman, heading south (upstream). Morton's section, along with the Parrott guns, opened fire on the Mazeppa and disabled her. She then drifted to the bank opposite the Confederates where she was abandoned.⁶ A volunteer swam across the chilly river, and the Mazeppa and her barge were soon in appreciative Confederate hands. Supplies taken from the Mazeppa in-

cluded "hard bread, blankets, shoes, clothing, axes, and other military stores."⁷ Buford later decided to burn the Mazeppa after the stores were removed because of the threat of three Federal gunboats. General Forrest arrived in Paris on the 29th, and hearing of the action at Fort Heiman, sent Chalmers on to the river to support Buford.

The next day a Federal steamer, Anna, came from the direction of Johnsonville and was fired on at Paris Landing. Colonel Bell, hoping to take the Anna in good condition, ceased the firing and commanded her captain to bring her to the bank. The captain appeared to submit, but fooled the Confederates and continued downstream under heavy fire at both Paris Landing and Fort Heiman. She was never stopped, but Forrest later wrote that Anna "sunk before she reached Paducah."⁸

Later on October 30, the gunboat Undine and the transport Venus, with two barges, came from Johnsonville and were fired on at Paris Landing and Fort Heiman. They withdrew around a bend in the river, and were succeeded by the unalerted J. W. Cheeseman which was quickly disabled. Her crew abandoned her and the Confederates took possession. Meanwhile, Chalmers and Bell changed positions and began firing on the Undine and Venus which were soon abandoned also.

"A small freight of commissary stores, including coffee, candies, and nuts, and a quantity of furniture" was taken from the Cheeseman which, being considered beyond repair, was burned.⁹ Forty-three prisoners were taken during the encounters with the Venus, including one officer and ten infantry men.¹⁰ Union losses were two men killed and eight wounded.¹¹

On October 31, General Forrest joined his men at the river. Repairs were completed on the Venus and the Undine and the two boats, waving the Confederate flag, pulled out for a test run to Fort Heiman. Due to the poor condition of the horses, the two twenty-pound Parrott guns and other supplies at Fort Heiman were loaded onto the Venus. The sight of the Confederate flag being flown on a boat aroused the troops on land who "made the air ring with cheer upon cheer for Forrest and his cavalry upon their novel element."¹²

Captain Gracy (who earlier made the volunteer swim across the river to retrieve the Mazeppa) was given command of the Undine and Lieutenant-Colonel W. A. Dawson commanded the Venus. Colonel Dawson, unsure of his own abilities and those of his cavalymen to man a steamer, said to General Forrest, "Now General, I'll take this gunboat anywhere you say. But I want to tell you now I don't know anything about it. And I want you to promise me that if I lose her and have to come in afoot, you won't cuss me out about it."¹³ Forrest laughed and told Dawson that he should abandon and burn the boat if they were in great danger.

Forrest was then ready to move south toward Johnsonville. He ordered his "horse marines" not to pass out of the protection of the forces on land. On that day, November 1, rain began flooding and washing out the roads, making them rougher and more difficult to travel. The rain continued through the night. On November 2, the Confederate boats wandered too far ahead of the slow-moving land forces. Federal Lieutenant-Commander King, with the gunboats Key West and Tawah, rounded a bend and encountered the Venus followed by the Undine.¹⁴ The Undine fell back when the Federal boats began firing and the Venus, after receiving several shells and reportedly being sabotaged by Union prisoners, was abandoned by her crew of cavalymen and recovered by the Federal boats.¹⁵ The Venus had on her the two twenty-

pound Parrotts as well as "two-hundred seventy-six boxes of hard bread, and other freight . . . taken from the Mazeppa."¹⁶ The Undine was saved for the time being by Chalmers' support from the bank.

Most of the troops camped at Reynoldsburg on the night of November 2. Forrest camped about four miles south of them. To the south of Forrest, in the area of Johnsonville, Colonel Mabry, with Thrall's battery, was joined from the south by Lieutenant-Colonel Taylor. The next day, the Federal gunboats Key West, Tawah, and Elfin ran into Confederate forces about two miles below Johnsonville and were immediately fired on. About that same time, six other Federal gunboats: Moose, Brilliant, Victory, Paw Paw, Fairy, and Curlew approached from the north. The Undine was used as a decoy in this skirmish, her commander challenging the Federal boats to come within range of the land guns. As three gunboats closed in, the Undine, with "very little ammunition remaining and no more fuel," was run ashore and burned.¹⁷ The Federal gunboats, with more than one hundred guns as compared to the twelve of the Confederates, were held to the north and driven back to Johnsonville to the south. The Key West retreated with nineteen shots through her.¹⁸

It was about this time that a Confederate regiment of new troops "stampeded" and left behind all of their equipment. The other soldiers divided up the goods left behind and awaited the return of the run-aways. Upon their return, the new troops were harassed so severely by the veterans that they denied ever owning the stolen articles.¹⁹

Johnsonville was a small area immediately south of the mouth of Trace Creek on the east bank of the Tennessee river. An extensive redoubt was built on a one hundred foot hill to defend the train depot. The west bank, eight hundred yards away, was about twenty feet high at the bank and sloped downward to the west. The west bank was heavily forested except immediately opposite the depot where the trees were cleared to reveal the possible approach of the enemy. There were several warehouses and workshops at Johnsonville along with the depot, the dock, and the numerous barges, gunboats, and transports. Colonel Thompson was in charge of a force of nearly four thousand men at Johnsonville, and Lieutenant King was in charge of the gunboats there.

Forrest's men worked all night in a cold rain to place their batteries. They took great care not to alert the Federal troops to their presence. Brigadier-General Lyon, who had been in Kentucky, now joined Forrest with about four hundred men. He took Thrall's battery to just opposite the south part of the landing, as ordered, hauling the guns with horses as close to the position as possible and carrying them the remaining three hundred yards by hand. Throughout the night of November 3 they "sunk chambers for guns, and cut embrasures through the solid, natural parapet in front."²⁰

Colonel Rucker placed Morton's battery just opposite Johnsonville and divided Brigg's battery in half, four pieces each at four hundred yards north and one and one half miles south of his position to guard a bar in the river. A road had to be cut for Morton's guns, which had to be carried through a half mile of cypress swamp. The guns had to be lifted over fallen trees. Since they were later at setting up their guns than the other groups, they feared daylight would expose their position as they prepared for the battle. To remedy this problem, Lyon and Rucker "contrived artificial screens of beech bushes, which, skillfully intermingled with those already growing along the river bank, effectually masked the working parties."²¹

There were three boats moored at the docks at Johnsonville, getting up

steam on the morning of November 4, "their upper decks covered with their officers and their crew, the later either busy scrubbing or washing their clothes."²² There were no indications an attack was expected. Passengers were on the decks of the steamers and even some ladies were seen on the bank. Forrest watched all of this attentively through his glasses until time for the attack.

'I ordered simultaneous assault to commence at three o'clock," wrote Forrest.²³ When two gunboats pulled out into the stream a little before three o'clock, Lieutenant Brown ordered Morton's battery to open fire on them. The gunboats, as well as the redoubt, returned the fire, and the battle was on. On the third round of firing a shell apparently hit a boiler in one of the boats at the dock, "for the agonizing screams of the wounded and scalded were plainly heard across the broad river."²⁴ Sharpshooters began firing on the boats that had left the dock, and they were soon abandoned.

The burning gunboats drifted into the barges and transports, spreading their flames. It was widely believed that the heavy Confederate firing had set the boats on fire, but, to the contrary, it was Lieutenant King who, after Colonel Thompson had consented, set the boats on fire. Lieutenant King thought Forrest had four times as many men and guns as he actually had, and he advised Colonel Thompson that the boats should be burned to keep the Confederates from capturing them.²⁵

The Confederate artillery began concentrating on the redoubt after seeing that the boats were rapidly being consumed by fire. In a sense, they swapped shells with the Federal troops, for the Confederates were exploding shells within the perimeter of the redoubt and several shells from the reboubt "were dropped into the sunken (Confederate) gun-chambers, but without further harm than breaking the rammers in the hands of the gunners in two instances, for they sank so deep before they exploded that they did no injury."²⁶

Forrest was excited by the firing artillery, and he wanted to get his hand in on it. He took position "with the section of Morton's battery just opposite the town, with General Buford as number one at the gun and Colonel Bell as number four, 'handling, loading and firing the piece with the enthusiasm of a boy on a Fourth of July.' When a shot was reported too high the General's command would be to 'elevate the breech of that gun a little lower!' but his volunteer gun crew knew what he meant."²⁷

The shells exploding on the hill set a pile of hay on fire which spread to some heaps of corn and bacon and finally on to the warehouses. James's rifles, who were with Briggs's section, were interested in the contents of a pile of barrels under a tarpaulin on the far bank. As they fired into it, it burst into blue flames and "burning liquor ran in torrents of livid flame down the hill-side."²⁸ By four o'clock that afternoon, all of the boats were on fire. All of the warehouses and other buildings eventually caught on fire, and the Confederates withdrew, leaving Rucker's Brigade to support the artillery.

It was reported that "by nightfall the wharf for nearly a mile up and down the river presented a solid sheet of flames."²⁹ The night was "almost as luminous by the conflagration as the day."³⁰

The following day Forrest returned to view the destruction. He wrote that "nothing was left unconsumed."³¹ A regiment of Negroes came to the bank as Briggs' guns were being removed and, throwing off their coats and clenching their fists, "hurled across the stream . . . their whole arsenal of explosive,

offensive epithets, oaths, and maledictions." Some of the remaining artillery fired at them and they quickly dispersed.³²

In an official report, an inspector wrote that only one warehouse and six barges remained after the attack. The monetary value of the Federal losses has been placed as high as eight million dollars by some enthusiastic Confederate supporters and as low as two million, two hundred thousand dollars by an embarrassed northern inspector. Nevertheless, Forrest's raid was a thorough venture. The lowest estimate of the destruction must list three gunboats, eleven transports, about eighteen barges, many buildings and large amounts of quartermaster and commissary supplies. Forrest wrote, "My loss during the entire trip was two killed and nine wounded."³³ He captured one hundred fifty prisoners.³⁴ One Union figure of U. S. human loss was eight men killed and wounded in the attack.³⁵

During the battle, Colonel Thompson, in the face of little seen action, sent a frantic message for help to Nashville. On November 5, one thousand Federal troops arrived at the ruins, only to find that Forrest had already moved on to meet General Hood. Colonel Cobb, who was present at Johnsonville, wrote after the battle that, to his knowledge, "There was no effort to save the stores . . . The Government employes were all stampeded."³⁶ U. S. Lieutenant-Colonel William Sinclair wrote of the Union troops that "After the fire a general system of theft was inaugurated, stealing clothing, hospital stores, and anything they could lay their hands upon."³⁷

The press on both the U. S. and Confederate sides gave slanted reports of the event. *The New York Times* said, "yesterday (November 5th) . . . the enemy were engaged in burying their dead. Our loss was small." It also claimed that Confederate campfires "showed a force of at least twenty thousand strong."³⁸ Forrest never had more than three thousand men in the raid. *The Louisville Daily Journal* told its readers, "Forrest and Taylor are endeavoring to cross the Tennessee river, for the purpose, it is believed, of invading Kentucky."³⁹ This could not have been because Forrest headed south immediately after leaving Johnsonville. *The Charleston Mercury* and *The Charleston Daily Courier* both gave reasonably accurate reports of the battle, exaggerating only the stories of the gunners' rammers being broken by Federal shells.

Forrest succeeded in breaking General Sherman's line of supplies, but it was too late to stop him. Sherman decided to supply his needs by ravaging private property between Atlanta and Savannah. General Forrest joined General Hood in a disastrous attempt to take Nashville on December 15th and 16th, 1864, where about five thousand, five hundred Confederates were killed or wounded as compared to the one thousand, two hundred of the Union forces.⁴⁰

Although Johnsonville continued to exist as a community, it was never of major importance to either side during the remainder of the war.

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